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AUTHOR Fletcher, Ruth; Cole, Jack T.

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ABSTRACT

This report describes a negotiated evaluation model used to examine the effectiveness of 10 regional center cooperatives (RCCs) that assist small rural New Mexico school districts in implementing provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The 9-month evaluation aimed to determine the scope of existing RCC services, the distribution of funding to member school districts, and the feasibility of RCCs assuming fiscal responsibility for program implementation. Evaluation consisted of 12 steps involving extensive consultation and negotiation with program stakeholders, including representatives from school districts, state agencies, school boards, parent organizations, and other groups who would be affected by study outcomes. The development phase of the evaluation included organization of available data, identification of major stakeholders, and input from stakeholders in the development and refinement of survey and interview instruments. The implementation phase involved visiting RCC sites to gather additional data, conduct interviews, and compile and analyze data. The last phase involved formulating options and recommendations and giving stakeholders the opportunity to disagree with interpretation of the findings and to modify recommendations. The negotiated evaluation model promoted educational change by involving stakeholders in the evaluation process and formulation of recommendations. This model is easily replicable and can be adapted to evaluations of programs serving various student populations. Contains a figure outlining the evaluation process. (LP)

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Ruth Fletcher, Ph.D.
Jack T. Cole, Ph.D.
New Mexico State University
Special Education/Communication Disorders

Don't Kill the Messenger! Conducting Program Evaluation and Facilitating Change through Negotiated Evaluation

ED 369 622

The New Mexico State Board of Education (SBE) established, through Regulation No. 84-6, ten regional center cooperatives across the state to provide assistance to and address the needs of the smaller/rural local education agencies (LEAs) in the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) formerly the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA). SBE Regulation 84-6 permitted New Mexico LEAs to form regional center cooperatives (RCCs) and submit consolidated applications under IDEA through the use of the Joint Powers Agreement Act (11-1-1 to 11-1-7, NMSA, 1978). Leeway was also given RCCs to serve non-member agencies and to pool other than IDEA funds though subsequent approved, multi-year Joint Powers Agreements (SDE, 1990).

The governance/management functions of the NM-RCCs were relegated to "Councils" whose membership was comprised of the local superintendents or state agency administrators of member agencies. In seven of the RCCs an LEA was assigned to serve as the fiscal agent for the RCC on behalf of member districts. In three RCCs (beginning in the 1990-1991 School Year) the RCC Councils were designated as their own Boards of Finance (SDE 1990, 1990a), but this was a temporary solution.

Statement of the Problem

After eight years of operation, the ten RCCs reported that the joint powers agreement process was cumbersome and rendered the collaborative process unwieldy at best and unworkable at worst. Concomitantly, several larger, and very vocal LEAs, which were not member s of RCCs, wrote a letter of concern to the State Education Agency (SEA) criticizing the SEA and complaining that the state's discretionary funds under IDEA were primarily directed to the smaller districts when larger districts were also in need of the funding. Multiple meetings with representatives of RCCs and single LEAs did not result in any resolutions. Both sides were entrenched in their positions.

At the urging of the RCCs, the New Mexico Department of Education prepared a request for proposal (RFP) for a contractor to design, develop, and conduct a statewide study to determine (a) the scope of existing Regional Center Cooperative (RCC) services, (b) distribution of funding and (c) the feasibility of RCCs assuming the fiscal responsibilities associated with the implementation of RCC activities.

The RFP identified preferred outcomes of the study to

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include recommendations for (a) alternatives and potential services to be provided by RCCs; (b) maintenance and/or modification of existing structure/organization of RCCs; and (c) potential RCC collaborative efforts with other statewide agencies [e.g., single and member LEAs, Health and Environment Department (HED) and community non-profit training centers (NPTCs), state supported schools (SSSs), and institutions of higher education (IHE)] in addressing statewide needs (SDE, 1990,). The time-line given was originally one year. Final time-line was nine months.

Development of NM-RCC Study

In selecting a method for the study in response to the RFP, the evaluators sought a process that (a) assessed current and anticipated claims and critical issues, (b) resulted in alternative responses to the identifies issues. and (c) assured participatory decision making.

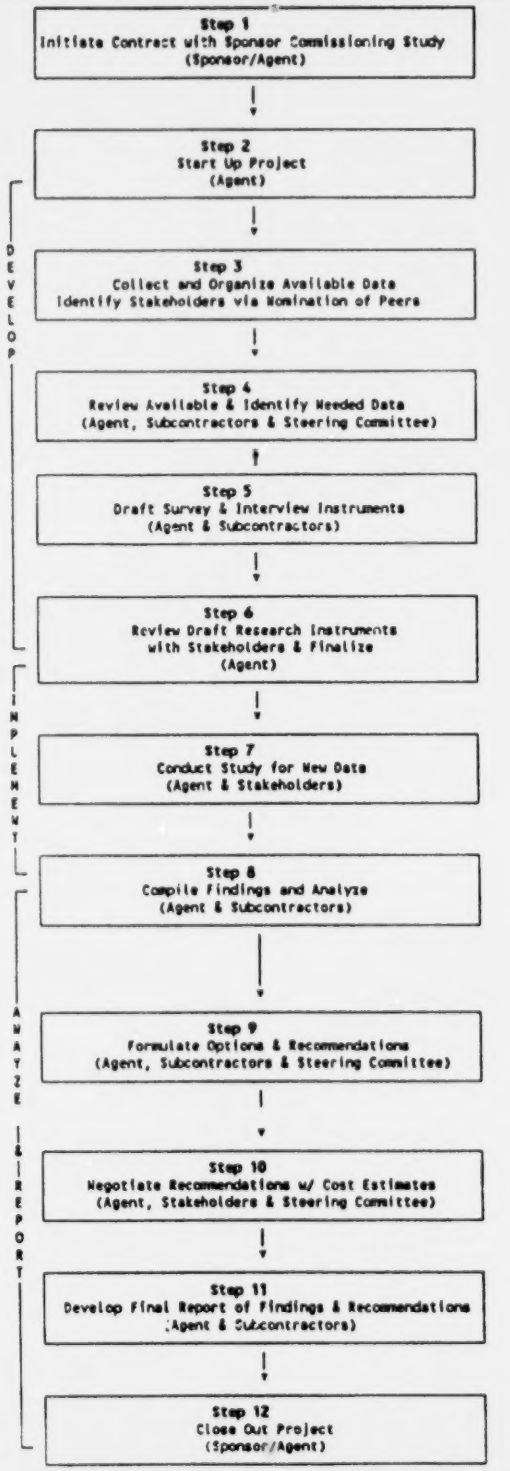
Strategic Planning for Non-Profit Agencies, adapted from Dietrich (1986, p. 6) served as the basic framework for the study. The Dietrich model offers a process for establishing a strategic fit (figure 1) between the non-profit organization (RCCs) and the environment (local, state and national governments and educational agencies) and:

1. uses existing or available data
2. can be accomplished within flexible time frames
3. is participatory
4. includes a focus on the existing agency (RCCs) as well as the outside world
5. is creative
6. results in **practical** outcomes

The modified strategic planning process, adapted for the NM-RCC Study, require 12 steps within three major phases (Figure 1). The 12 steps offer a structure within which interview and survey studies were to be designed and implemented with extensive involvement and negotiation with all **stakeholders.** Guba and Lincoln (1989, p.40) define "stakeholder" as persons or groups that are put at some risk by the study. Stakeholder includes: (a) agents, (b) beneficiaries, and (c) potential beneficiaries such as, persons or groups potentially benefitted or negatively affected by (a) the use of RCCs or (b) by a failure of the evaluators to include them in the study.

Figure 1

Phases & Steps for Strategic Planning with Fourth Generation Principles



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The **Development Phase** included the first six steps of the Negotiated Evaluation process.

Step 1: The evaluator operationalized the RFP award through an agreement with the contracting agency (agent).

The contract actually required three months to negotiate through state procedures cutting the length of time for the study from one year to nine months.

Step 2: Project start-up included appointment of a project **Steering Committee** and selection of expert sub-contractors to analyze data.

In the New Mexico study, the Steering Committee was comprised of representatives of **stakeholder** groups, nominated by members of the representative groups (i.e., RCC staff and Governing Councils, single non-member LEAs, state agencies using RCCs for services, school boards association, administrators association, parent organizations, school collaboratives not RCCs, legislative education committees, state department of education, human services department, universities' distance education, governor's education advisor, state IDEA panel). Nominations were sought by written request to members of the groups as well as through interviews with prominent individuals. Representative stakeholder were taken from those receiving the most nominations with consideration given to geographic representation.

The representative stakeholders were involved in the development of the questions to be asked, the design of the research instruments, and the methods to be used to gather the data (survey and interview).

The selected subcontractors were recognized in the state as (a) expert in school finance, and (b) in New Mexico school law.

Step 3: While nominations were in process, known available data was collected from: the local, state and federal level.

The available data was organized and presented with the Steering Committee membership.

Step 4: The steering Committee was convened (a) to review available data and information baselines, and (b) to identify additional data needed regarding organization (RCCs) and environment (LEAs, State, HED, SSSs, private providers, etc.).

The Steering Committee and project staff (a) defined key characteristics of data needed and potential data sources, and (b) identified additional stakeholders not already included in

the steering committee. Additional stakeholder were identified by the interview question, "Who disagrees with you that might bring another point of view into the study?"

Step 5: The evaluators developed draft survey and interview instruments with a projected time frame for the study and identified stakeholder to be involved.

Step 6: Evaluators reviewed proposed research design and instruments with stakeholder groups through statewide meetings such as: Special Education Quarterly Meetings hosted by the SEA, School Boards Association, School Administrators' Association, Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, Interagency Council under P.L. 99-457, IDEA State Advisory Panel, and state Council for Exceptional Children.

These contacts resulted in (a) revised data collection instruments, (b) proposed timeline for interview visits to regions and other stakeholder groups, and (c) proposed mailings and return dates for surveys.

With the completion of Step 6 the study entered the implementation phase.

Implementation of NM-RCC Study.

The **Implementation Phase** was one phase in which the major responsible parties were the project staff and agency support services.

Step 7: Activities involved travel to each of the 10 RCCs for (a) data gathering; and (b) interviews with Council members, RCC-staffs, contractors, beneficiaries, and anticipated beneficiaries.

Because of the small number of RCCs, a full census of all RCC directors and Council members was conducted. Stratified random samples were used with RCC-staff, district principals and staff, parents and other identified beneficiaries and anticipated beneficiary groups (e.g., private providers, HED, IHE).

Except for RCC descriptive and comparative data (demographic, personnel employment, and fiscal), confidentiality was granted all respondents to the questionnaires and interviews.

Data Analysis and Reporting

The **Data Analysis and Reporting** phase of the study contained five major steps. These steps involved project staff and subcontractors in Step 8 for the analysis of data, and the Steering Committee and identified major stakeholders in the prioritization of options (Steps 9 and 10). Development of the

final reports for the contracting agency (Steps 11 and 12) were the responsibility of project staff and subcontractors;however, both the interpretation of findings and the recommendations were negotiated with stakeholders in state meetings prior to finalization with the steering committee.

Step 8. Analysis of data included descriptive statistics (averages, etc.), and non-parametrics (e.g., use of chi square to identify statistically significant differences between groups). Comparisons of findings were made with national findings from three national studies conducted by Fletcher, Cole, and Strumor (1988, 1990) and Fletcher (1991).

The evaluators organized findings into graphs and tables; analyzed them for statistically significant differences between groups (i.e., members of RCCs and non-members of RCCs; Professionals and parents); and compared state findings with national findings, where applicable, and developed preliminary recommendations.

Step 9: Evaluators presented findings, analyses, and proposed options to Steering Committee, and generated additional options and recommendations.

Step 10: Evaluators and Steering Committee members presented the committees' recommendations and options to all major stakeholders for comments through conferences under the sponsorship of the SEA.

It was at these conferences and meetings that stakeholders could disagree with interpretation of findings and offer alternative interpretations and modify recommendations. Every comment was considered, and stakeholders who had the authority to veto any single recommendation with the legislature were purposefully sought out, and asked whether or not they could support the recommendation(s). If not, what they could support was garnered and taken back to the stakeholder groups for their further consideration. In all instances, the stakeholder groups supported the negotiated recommendation.

In this low populated state, talent is hard to come by and some very talented individual's were going to be negatively affected financially by the recommendations. Meetings with these individuals were also carried out so that the alternative recommendations could be discussed. With the personal consideration to their dilemma's, they assured the stakeholders that they could "live with" the recommendations. Their responses assured concurrence among groups at the 90% agreement rate.

Step 11: The negotiated findings and recommendations were prepared into a final report with recommendations for each critical issue: (a) legal organization--with a name change

recommendation to better define the mission; (b) funding issues, (c) IDEA provisions, (d) potential services--required and optional, and (e) potential costs of each recommendation.

Step 12: Evaluators submitted the final report with an Administrative Summary and the nonidentifiable data collected during the study to the contracting agent. The evaluators made themselves available to discuss the report with governmental committees, administrative bodies, and other boards upon request. Copies of the Executive Summary were mailed to all stakeholders after members of the State IDEA Advisory Panel accepted the report and supported the implementation of the recommendations.

Conclusion

The application of a Negotiated Evaluation process gave stakeholders throughout a geographically large, but sparsely populated state an involvement in a evaluation whose outcome could impact them either positively or negatively as an organization or as an individual. That involvement included the development of the questions to be answered, stakeholders to be involved from all sides of the issue, and negotiations of the interpretation of the findings and ultimate recommendations. Rumors were kept to a minimum for all activities occurred in public forums. Outcomes were acceptable to 90 percent or more of the stakeholders across stratified groups and individuals impacted negatively were made aware of the reasons for the recommendations and given opportunities to minimize the negative effects.

Potential for change was greatly enhanced by the full inclusion of stakeholders. Turf maintenance and political ideologies, so prevalent in rural states, were purposefully incorporated into the design rather than skirted by the evaluators. This negotiated evaluation model provided a system for educational program evaluation that is flexible in timeline; easily replicable; and can be adapted to address the formative and summative evaluations of programs serving populations at-risk, children with disabilities, bilingual programs, and other emerging issues highly charged with "turfisms."

This particular Negotiated Evaluation process resulted in desired legislation which two years after the study established through statute Regional Educational Cooperatives (Article 2B, Regional Cooperative Education, NMSA 1976 as amended 1993).

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